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## Non-Western Visions of International Order

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### Abstract

The scholarship on the concept of order has been expanding within international relations. The continuous upheaval of world politics first triggered a broad debate on the resilience of the liberal international order (LIO), which then led to scholarship on alternative conceptions of order, especially outside of the West. This review focuses on this body of research on non-Western views of order. It is structured geographically, taking a tour of scholarship from and on East and Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa, South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, and Eurasia. Although each region has its own intellectual traditions, we observe that these views portray the LIO in a less idealized form, exposing its hierarchical and Western-centered nature. However, while pushing for more inclusive and plural arrangements, these critiques have not yet amounted to the articulation of radical alternative ordering projects.

### INTRODUCTION

The world has witnessed an unusual level of upheaval in the past two decades. Since 2016, in

particular, with its cascade of unexpected electoral outcomes, global political surprises, the COVID pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the events of October 7, the feeling that world politics is in flux has only deepened. The Western triumphalism of the 1990s has been replaced in this century by a pronounced anxiety in Western capitals about the rise of China and the Global South. The domestic politics of countries both inside and outside of the traditional Western core of international order is increasingly defined by revisionist strongmen-type leaders skeptical of the status quo, both national and international. Global institutions long thought to be a mainstay of world politics can therefore no longer be taken for granted. Long-standing alliances, even between the United States and Europe, are being tested in numerous conflicts around the world.

Given this context, it is not surprising that there has been a marked increase in scholarship on the concept of order in international relations (IR). This research has progressed in several stages. In the first wave, which took off especially after the 2016 US elections and the Brexit referendum in the same year, much of the discussion focused (and continues to focus) on the liberal international order (LIO). Debates ranged from whether the LIO was genuinely in crisis to whether it even ever truly existed. In particular, much attention was paid to the ways this order was being currently challenged and contested by trends such as the alleged decline of the United States, the rise of China, the aggression of Russia, the unreliability of the regional powers of the Global South, populism, climate change, and its own hypocrisy (see, e.g., [Acharya 2017](#); [Ikenberry 2018, 2020, 2024](#); [Adler-Nissen & Zarakol 2021](#); [Lake et al. 2021](#); [Lawson & Zarakol 2023](#); [Reus-Smit & Zarakol 2023](#); [Goddard et al. 2024](#); [Wilson Rowe et al. 2025](#)). Scholars also asked whether and how multilateral institutions could respond to these tests.

This more institutional wave also paved the way for a second parallel but more theoretical research agenda focused on the concept of order itself and how it should be defined beyond the LIO. That was partly because of a growing awareness that the term “order” was not particularly well theorized in the existing literature and partly because it seemed that the next international order may not necessarily resemble the current one, necessitating a more expansive definition, or at least a rethinking. This second wave of research attempting to broaden the definition of order has progressed along several different avenues, from modelling to normative theory. One particularly productive vein has been the mining of history for alternative world orders that have existed in the past (see, e.g., [Phillips & Sharman 2015](#); [Pardesi 2017](#); Reus-Smit 2018; [Kang](#)

[2020](#); [Phillips & Reus-Smit 2020](#); [Spruyt 2020](#); [Zarakol 2022, 2024](#); Sharman & Zarakol 2024; [Acharya & Pardesi 2025](#)). Much of this scholarship inevitably focuses on regions outside of the West. The more inclusive term “world order” is sometimes preferred over “international order” in more historically oriented work because in the past, nation-states were not the norm ([Zarakol 2024](#)). Finally, beyond the historical scholarship, there is also considerable policy interest in how non-Western countries view discussions around the crisis of the LIO now ([Vinjamuri 2025](#)) and whether they are starting to formulate alternative visions of world order of their own, either by relying on the aforementioned historical conceptions that emanated from their specific regions or by modifying the LIO.

This review focuses on this second strand of research, centering on non-Western views of world or international orders as expressed primarily in academic scholarship while allowing for the fact that in some regions there is considerable overlap between academia and policy. We define order as “rules, understandings, and institutions that govern (and pattern) relations between the actors of world politics” ([Zarakol 2024](#), p. 201). This definition allows us to differentiate the concept from other social structures that are not sites of power and direct political dispute and is also inclusive enough to capture historical and geographical variability. Hence, we review works that discuss world order or international order both explicitly as concepts and implicitly by examining the rules, understandings, and institutions shaping world politics. For the ease of the reader, we have divided our analysis geographically, taking a tour of scholarship from and on East and Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa, South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, and Eurasia (including the Middle East).

A few caveats are in order. We do not contend that the various differences in international and regional order conceptions always map neatly onto geographical divisions. We are not at all advocating geo-epistemic essentialism ([Barkawi et al. 2023](#)). Many scholars who write on non-Western visions of world order are based in the West, even if they originally hail from the region in question. Academics who are theorizing international order are also often trained in the West or are highly aware of Western debates, and they have often spent time in other regions as well. Alternative visions of order are thus almost always articulated in direct relation to discussions in the West. Indeed, none of the discussions we cover below are entirely confined to regional boundaries; in many cases, theories and ideas—such as dependency theory (DT) or the notion of a civilizational state—have spread across regions. Furthermore, the regions themselves are not

fixed or stable. As the discussion below shows, Southeast Asia, for instance, is claimed by more than one regional conceptualization. Finally, our review cannot be exhaustive; order scholarship outside of the West is both vast and growing fast.

Although each region has its own intellectual traditions and idiosyncrasies in terms of international order discussions, we can observe a number of similarities that generally hold true outside of the West. First, there is no idealization of the modern international order or its current form. The LIO's description as a progressive order based on the equal recognition of its member states, with rational and meritocratic criteria for admission (see, e.g., [Ikenberry 2011](#), [Lake et al 2021](#)), is generally rejected. This is true even in regions and states that have greatly benefited from the LIO's institutions, rules, and practices.

Second, and related, there is widespread acknowledgment of the hierarchical and Western-centric nature of twentieth-century international order. In some cases, especially in Latin America and Africa, there are long-standing intellectual traditions theorizing international hierarchies, and those traditions have influenced global discussions about order, including in the West. However, in none of the regions we survey has this criticism of the LIO within the academic scholarship (yet) amounted to a clear articulation of radically alternative visions of world order. In some settings, there is a gesture toward history to look for alternative conceptions of order, but the scholarship is relatively nascent. At the same time, practices of state and academic collaboration in both theorizing orders and formulating policies to act on these ideas are emerging, most notably in China but also in other settings.

Third, to the extent that alternative visions of world order are forming, they hint at two directions. On the one hand, in some countries and regions (e.g., Latin America or the Indo-Pacific), there is a broad push to transform the LIO into a more inclusive, multipolar or multicentered order. The notion that fuller recognition of non-Western powers or non-Western civilizations would improve the existing order finds general purchase. On the other hand, in some corners, there is also a belief that some degree of hierarchy within international order is unavoidable, but the LIO is or was hypocritical for pretending to offer equal treatment. For these groups, it follows that the next international order will work better with a different hegemon than the United States or a center away from the West.

## **EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA**

What is generally true about international order scholarship on and from Asia is that most of it is surprisingly ambivalent toward the current international order. This region is not where we find the strongest (academic) criticisms of Western arguments about international order or the LIO. English-language scholarship from the region is also very conversant with Western approaches, theories, and positions. At the same time, much of this space is dominated by a degree of Sinocentrism. This manifests specifically as an argument about the hierarchical nature of past Chinese world orders discussed as an implicit or explicit (and often idealized) alternative to the Western international order model, an alternative expected to replace the LIO in the near future.

The international order discourse in Asia first started taking shape in the West, around the question of how China, as a rising superpower, relates to the LIO and whether China endeavors to revise, modify, or accept the current international order. This agenda manifested early on in Buzan's (2010) writings on China (see also [Callahan 2008](#), [Feng & He 2017](#), [Tang 2018](#), [Wang 2022](#)). Using the English School approach of the international society, [Buzan \(2010\)](#) identified China as a reformist revisionist power that strategically engages with some international institutions for pragmatic reasons but also resists, seeks to reform, or aims to change the status regarding others. Buzan concluded that to move toward a peaceful rise, China should prioritize building a distinct regional order based on Asian values, reflecting postcolonial realities and engendering a more decentralized global order. Many others have also observed China's balancing act between reform and revision. [Chin & Thakur \(2010\)](#), for example, argue that China largely integrated into the LIO even as it developed different aid practices. Likewise, in their study of Chinese scholars' perceptions of international order, [Feng et al. \(2019\)](#) argue that Chinese academics, despite their belief in China's growing capabilities and economic power, do not view China as a challenger to the Western-inflected international order, nor do they anticipate China replacing the United States as the hegemon in the near future.

More recently, scholars have also sought to tease out ideas of international order from China's interactions with the world. For example, [Johnston \(2019, pp. 56–57\)](#) challenges the idea of a single LIO and highlights eight potential orders: constitutive, military or coercive, political development, social development, trade, monetary, informational, and environmental. Johnston argues that China's relationship with international order is selective, with Beijing supporting some orders strongly, supporting others weakly, and opposing some, rendering the status quo versus revisionist binary of earlier waves of research on China inadequate when describing

China's relationship with a world of orders. Likewise, Foot & King (2020) challenge arguments that China has a singular (or singularly hostile) attitude toward the current international order or its institutions (see also [Foot 2024](#), [Haug et al. 2024](#), [King 2024](#)).

Scholars based in China are also particularly interested in rethinking the concept of international order, especially from a normative perspective. [Qin \(2010\)](#) suggests that a more just and fair international order can be achieved only if a plural world is properly recognized, entailing the proper recognition of values, ideas, and beliefs of all actors, instead of a narrow Western-centric one. Yan's (2016) article (in Chinese) on order in a disordered world is another influential publication (domestically) on how China understands international order. Yan argues that international order and international system are distinct and should not be conflated as they have been in Western conceptualizations. He suggests that the Chinese understanding of international order is rooted in a Confucian worldview that privileges harmony, justice, and shared prosperity (Yan [2016](#), p. 9). This stands in contrast to Western conceptions of international order, often seen by Chinese scholars as being based on liberal values and dominated by Western powers (Yan [2016](#), p. 18). Yan concludes that any future order will be shaped by interactions between the Western and Chinese conceptions, arguing that this will lead to a gradual transformation of the existing Western-dominated order. [Tang \(2018\)](#) characterizes China as a selective revisionist power, suggesting that while China does not seek to dismantle the existing order, it aims to reform parts of it to make it more amenable to its interests. Tang adds that China advocates for incremental modifications to the order and argues that Beijing prefers to work with existing global institutions to introduce reforms (see also [Seow & Loh 2025](#)). Reflecting the wide array of views on this particular question, a review essay in *International Organization* on four notable books on international order by prominent Chinese scholars—Xiao Ren, Yaqing Qin, Xuetong Yan, and Tingyang Zhao—concludes that conceptions of order are theoretically and empirically diverse in China, challenging what the reviewers say is a commonly held idea of a singular vision of international order emanating from Beijing ([Xiong et al. 2024](#)). The essay observes three common commitments from these four scholars that stand in contrast to existing Western scholarship: a relational approach to order, state morality in establishing order, and recognition of pluralism and diversity at the state level.

Much of the scholarship on China and East Asian orders also carries a strong policy connotation and is somewhat prescriptive. Liu & Yang (2023, p. 1385) examine the current

policy practices of China to conclude that China has largely supported the current order and does not wish to replace it with an alternative. The authors further suggest that China's preferred term of "international system" is one that is underpinned by international law, focusing on the pragmatic and functional aspects of the existing order (Liu & Yang 2023, p. 1391). Three schools of thought (or "genes," as the authors call them)—pro-West and liberal, anti-West and revolutionary, and proglobalization and growth-driven—influence how China relates to and thinks of the existing order (Liu & Yang 2023, p. 1399). Others have written on China's aid diplomacy during the COVID pandemic and how this was meant to advance China's vision of international order (Smith & Fallon 2020).

Others have drawn on Chinese history for concepts that can guide a future world order led by China. As early as 2009, Tingyang Zhao asserted that the Tianxia (天下) idea of order better captures the reality of world politics, as it is inclusive and presents itself as a compelling model of global governance. Zhao (2009, p. 6) writes that Tianxia is a 3,000-year-old Chinese concept referring to a system of "all under heaven," an all-inclusive world where all people can be in harmony that is compatible with all civilizations. [Wang \(2015\)](#) compares the durability of Tianxia to modern Westphalian ideas of sovereignty. According to Wang, since the Qin dynasty, the idea of Tianxia entailed a unified singular ruler, with several subordinate peripheral nations. This idea has persisted in Chinese thinking about order due to the state's long-standing monopoly over writing and teaching history. While the actual influence of Tianxia thinking has ebbed and flowed (reaching a nadir during Mao's rule), Wang argues that it is enjoying a revival today, with intellectuals embracing it as a more inclusive and tolerant order than the existing one. This contemporary Chinese vision of a better order is founded on hierarchical authority derived from righteousness, rituals, and differentiation, rather than on power and the Westphalian principle of sovereign equality. [Callahan \(2008\)](#) is a bit more critical of the Tianxia discourse. He argues that China may not be advocating for a posthegemonic order per se, but it is advocating for an alternative hierarchical vision rooted in historical Sinocentrism.

Not everyone is equally sanguine about using Chinese world order historiography in service of contemporary political projects. [Zhao \(2015\)](#) critiques the political historicization of China's past for current projects of order-making, particularly state-sanctioned attempts. He argues that the project to claim alleged benevolence and China's peaceful rise in its imperial past by political elites functions only to advance the goals of the Chinese government. Proponents of the

tributary system Chinese order, Zhao contends, are most guilty of this. He cites evidence from Kublai Khan's conquests, the Qing's doubling of its territories, and the Qianlong emperor's violent campaign against the Zunghars to underline that civilizational China was neither uniquely peaceful nor uniquely violent. Different lessons should be drawn: Chinese leaders aimed to restore a nineteenth-century vision for China in the twenty-first century, seeking to reestablish regional hierarchy and enhance China's security. [Hui's \(2005, 2020, 2023\)](#) work also has a critical bent. She grapples with recent efforts in the IR field, especially within the Sinocentric school, to reevaluate East Asia's premodern political order through the lens of Chinese cultural and political centrality. Hui interrogates the claim, advanced by scholars such as Xuetong Yan, that China provided a stable, Confucian-based hierarchy that ensured peace and order in the region. She argues that the notion of China's continuous hegemony in historical Asia is an anachronistic and essentialist reading of the past. She draws on both historical and theoretical analyses to demonstrate that the tribute system and China's supposed centrality were not as stable, coherent, or effective as they are often portrayed. Instead, Hui emphasizes the fragmented, contested, and dynamic nature of power relations in premodern Asia. Along this line, Benabdallah (2021) notes how the Chinese government has revived stories of fifteenth-century Chinese navigators to gain international support for the New Silk Road project. This is also an example of how historical order scholarship is used in service of contemporary order building projects.

In summary, Zhao, Hui, and others point to a Sinocentric bias in much of the scholarship on Chinese conceptions of world order, privileging the Chinese vantage point alone. Scholars have warned against erasing the experiences and conceptualizations of orders outside of China. Kang (2020, p. 65) notes that just as much of the field's understanding of orders has been shaped by distinctly Western experiences, there is also the (potential) pitfall that non-Western international orders will be seen primarily through a Sinocentric lens. Kang (2010, [2020](#)) argues that the tributary system was not merely an instrument of Chinese dominance, but rather a mutually recognized and institutionalized order in which other states (especially Korea, Vietnam, the Ryukyu Kingdom, etc.) willingly participated. This system, to Kang, fostered a predictable and peaceful regional order, especially when compared to the more war-prone and competitive European state system of the same era. Kang argues that this East Asian international system was stable, legitimate, and hierarchical, anchored on and through imperial China (see also [Suzuki](#)

[2009](#)).

Turning now from China to the broader East and Southeast Asia, most states in the region accept that the LIO has benefitted them. If there is a Southeast Asian vision of international order, it is primarily about the absence of war (Glas 2022). There is no strong interest in remaking international order in this part of the world, but rather in creating a more robust regional order and holding the LIO accountable to its own standards. Some scholars have long suggested that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) already forms such a regional order, centered on the maintenance of peace through common ideas and agreements of peace ([Khong 2005](#), [Nesadurai 2009](#)). A recent special issue in *International Affairs* that examines the views of ASEAN states on international order supports this contention. There, Bajpai & Laksmana ([2023](#)) argue that Asian states generally support the constitutive norms of international order, such as independence, equality, and the rule of law, but perceive the LIO as inconsistent and even hypocritical. Most Asian states also support the regulatory norms underpinning international order but resist the universalizing tendency of liberal democracy and its values as the international standard. Singapore, for instance, stands out in being the most ardent supporter of the LIO ([Loh 2023](#)). While it rejects political liberalism and its purported universality embedded in this order, it has been the most vocal in articulating anxieties about its fate. Singapore has preferred the (much less contentious) term “rules-based international order” rather than simply “international order” or “LIO” since 2016. In the same issue, na Thalang ([2023](#)) argues that Thailand also selectively backs aspects of international order that boost its national security, such as United States–led security agreements and economic liberalism. It has historically adapted to shifts in the regional and global balance of power, maintaining relations with multiple major actors without rigid commitments (i.e., bending with the wind) (Kislenko 2002). Even so, Thailand’s ideas about order are thus far shaped by royalist–nationalist ideology, creating a complicated and sometimes contentious relationship with the global human rights regime, particularly with Western powers. [Umar \(2023\)](#) argues that Indonesia’s view of the current international order centers on maintaining autonomy through sovereign equality and multilateralism. [Do \(2023\)](#) asserts that Vietnam’s relationship with international order has evolved from being an outsider during the Cold War to a supporter of the current rules-based international order. Hanoi envisions a multipolar world where the voices of smaller powers are heard and supports the United Nations and ASEAN’s roles in global governance. Discussions of

international order in Southeast Asia thus cannot be divorced from ASEAN, as it is the primary architect and the proclaimed central driver of regionalism, governing and configuring security and economic and political relations. Unlike in China, discussions here are also generally much more policy focused rather than conceptual or historical.

### **LATIN AMERICA**

Unlike in East Asia, no single country dominates the discursive space about international order in Latin America (even Brazil is not China). The scholarship on international order in Latin America can be broadly grouped in two columns. First, the region has a rich intellectual history of theorizing its peripheral positionality in the modern world order, particularly within DT research traditions. This ranges from foreign policy analysis to postcolonial and decolonial perspectives where the state itself becomes a focus of critique. Such approaches conceive the modern world order as rooted in long-standing power asymmetries and study how actors navigate such hierarchies. Second, there is the more recent scholarship in dialogue with debates on world order unfolding in major English-language IR outlets. While these works echo long-standing concerns with peripheral positionalities and foreign policy, they often study Latin American historical experiences and international order in light of contemporary mainstream IR debates. They are also less concerned with political economy. Some scholars in this column have also unearthed the role of Latin American actors (i.e., diplomats, international lawyers, politicians, intellectuals) in the construction of the LIO and thus have claimed a degree of ownership in the LIO for Latin America. The two columns overlap in their emphasis on the consequences of peripherality, which is Latin America's main contribution to theorizations of international order.

In the first column, DT is a diverse research tradition seeking to understand sociopolitical consequences of structured economic inequalities (see Antunes de Oliveira & Kvangraven 2023, [Tussie & Chagas-Bastos 2023](#)). A common denominator was the understanding of the world economy and politics as organized in terms of a mutually constitutive center and a periphery produced through recurrently asymmetric economic relations rooted on colonial legacies ([Kvangraven 2021](#)). Whereas DT scholarship would gain prominence in anglophone sociology and IR through its dialogue with world systems theory, it also became a cornerstone for thinking about world politics writ large in Latin American social sciences. Part of this tradition had a

more domestic focus (a second image reversed of sorts), exploring the ways in which the alliances between dominant groups in the center and periphery generated consequences for the reproduction of poor social conditions and patrimonial political institutions in the latter (see [Reis & Antunes de Oliveira 2023](#)).

Latin American IR scholarship has explored the consequences of these international hierarchies for Latin American states' ability to pursue their policy goals. These theories were constructed through dialogue with the foreign policy intellectual communities of the continent, bridging DT, anglophone IR theories, and diplomatic punditry, with an open goal of better informing foreign policymaking ([Tickner 2003](#), [Milani 2021](#), [Deciancio 2024](#)). Autonomy thus became the mirror image of dependency and the end goal of foreign policy in many Latin American states (or even public policy more broadly) ([Tickner 2014](#)). Carlos Puig in Argentina and Hélio Jaguaribe in Brazil stand out in this tradition of autonomy foreign policy theorists. Both had a highly positional, realist-leaning vision of world order as institutionally locked-in asymmetries, in which peripheral countries could only, collectively or individually, strive to limit the constraints on their policy decisions ([Bernal-Meza 2013](#), [Lorenzini 2024](#)). The hierarchical view of order in the autonomist research tradition of IR has had a profound impact in shaping foreign policy, particularly under the broad concept of international insertion, which holds that peripheral and semiperipheral states can gain status by aligning with gatekeeping states and entering global networks ([Chagas-Bastos 2023](#)).

In the second column, we find more recent scholarship on the LIO (and its potential demise). This body of work shares with the DT-inflected approaches a deeply hierarchical vision of the contemporary international order but is much more in dialogue with established Western theories. It also has a pronounced foreign policy focus. In general, this scholarship explores the consequences of a power transition for Latin American states, particularly concerning the rise of China and the overall debate on emerging powers, through multiple angles of potential foreign policy realignments, engagement with the reform of multilateral institutions or alternative institution building, promotion of normative change, and so forth (e.g., [Escudé 2015](#), [Stuenkel 2020](#), [Schenoni et al. 2022](#)). More recently, works have also more explicitly engaged the role of the region, particularly Brazil, in promoting or challenging LIO institutions (e.g., [Casarões & Barros Leal Farias 2022](#), [Spektor 2023](#)). None of this entails a particularly radical alternative vision of international order, however.

There is also a growing strand of research that aims to revisit the role of Latin American actors (state actors, mostly) in the building of modern international order. This scholarship comes out of the dialogue of historical international relations and the long-standing research communities on Latin American diplomatic history, challenging established narratives about the formation of LIO and pushback on the idea that it was created by only the Global North. This research has explored crucial historical cases where Latin American states were able to shape key institutions and norms that have become constitutive of LIO ([Mantilla 2018](#), [Tourinho 2021](#), [Rodriguez & Thornton 2022](#), [Long & Schulz 2023](#)). While these works are less policy focused, by empirically exploring the successes and limitations of Latin American foreign policy in influencing a highly stratified world order, they end up echoing some of the key concerns of Latin America's intellectual IR tradition articulated by DT.

Another body of Latin American order scholarship with roots also arguably in DT is Latin American postcolonial and decolonial traditions. The key concept here is Quijano's (2007) formulation of the coloniality of power, which points to the widespread role of colonialism in producing modern subjectivities that reproduce colonial power relations. These approaches have brought attention to the pervasiveness of Eurocentric epistemic universalism and have called attention to the emancipatory role of epistemic pluralism ([Maldonado-Torres 2007](#), [Mignolo 2011](#), [De la Cadena 2015](#)). Some here bridge multiple contemporary strands of critical social theory from the Global South with European international political sociology (e.g., [Lage & Chamón 2016](#)). These contributions have also influenced the global IR approaches to international order in the broader discipline, as well as the movement to turn back to precolonial and indigenous cosmologies in conceptualizing world order ([Inoue 2018](#), [Querejazu 2022](#)).

## **AFRICA**

Contemporary views of world order in Africa are also deeply shaped by the process of state building and interactions with the West and Global North. As in Latin America, we find an older tradition of rich critique—Pan-Africanism in this context—which has been revitalized in recent years in discussions and critiques of the LIO. Moreover, as in Southeast Asia, there is considerable interest in both the conceptualizations and the successful practices of regional orders.

In the aftermath of decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, the shared experience of

colonial domination fostered a strong sense of Pan-African solidarity, but this solidarity manifested on different political grounds. [Abrahamsen \(2020\)](#) divides these perspectives into a sovereigntist camp and an internationalist camp. In the first group, some intellectuals and leaders offered a view of Pan-Africanism grounded in strengthening the political authority of individual states and opposing supranationalism that could dilute that authority. In the second, internationalist Pan-Africanism advocated the construction of continental institutions, as exemplified by Nkrumah's (1963) United States of Africa project. These different views were embedded in the power politics of the Cold War. Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism was part of a broader project of what [Getachew \(2019\)](#) calls worldmaking after empire, which connected the fight for political liberation and self-determination with a wider global struggle to address the economic and political inequalities inscribed in the then-nascent institutions of what is now called the LIO. This was most clearly exemplified in the advancement of the new international economic order agenda for reforming multilateral institutions, which it denounced as products of colonial powers that perpetuated colonial inequalities, an effort in which newly independent African states played a central role (see [Getachew 2019](#)). The internationalist view of Pan-Africanism was also intellectually linked to efforts to theorize world order across the Global South. Ghanaian thinking about world political structures—at the forefront of internationalist Pan-Africanism—was built in dialogue with DT, which originated primarily in Latin America, as discussed in the previous section ([Tieku 2021](#)). This transatlantic intellectual linkage also extended to the very origins of Pan-African solidarity, rooted in the experiences of the former enslaved diaspora in the Americas. Figures such as Fanon, Du Bois, and Garvey were crucial in articulating the critique of the racialized structures of modern world politics and in creating global solidarities ([Shilliam 2006, 2015; Pham & Shilliam 2016](#)).

At the same time, the international solidarity embedded in these Pan-African views of world order aligned them with the political left in the highly polarized context of the Cold War, even as several leaders sought to maintain a nonaligned position. The ideological and geopolitical polarization of the Cold War dragged disputes over Pan-African projects into the broader global struggle among great powers ([Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013](#)). This included direct intervention by the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in various domestic and cross-border conflicts on the continent. It also translated into alignment between the United States, former colonial powers in Europe, and African states that were wary of the supranational ambitions of

internationalist Pan-Africanism.

The end of the Cold War and the liberal hegemony of the 1990s profoundly reshaped African views of world order (see [Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019](#)). The social, health, and economic crises of the 1980s—coupled with the fall of the Soviet Union—eroded the legitimacy of several regimes associated with internationalist Pan-Africanism. At the same time, economic reforms and a wave of democratization consolidated across the continent. New regimes in Africa sought renewed engagement with the multilateral liberal optimism of the post-Cold War era. Post-Apartheid South Africa became a key leader in this African renaissance movement, which reimagined African states as committed stakeholders in international order, fighting marginalization through greater multilateral activism (i.e., through increased engagement in peacekeeping) ([Adebajo 2002, 2011](#); [Williams 2007](#)).

This renaissance also revitalized the political project of Pan-Africanism around the creation of the African Union (AU) in 2002. The organization replaced the Organization of African Unity with an expanded mandate and a liberal ideological foundation ([Abrahamsen et al. 2023](#)). The AU renewed traditional goals of regional integration, with limited success, but also became a tool for articulating African agency in global affairs. It served as a platform for cooperation with extraregional actors. This included externally funded projects as well as the coordination of security interventions on the continent, aimed at regaining local agency in response to global interventionist trends such as the responsibility to protect ([Williams 2007](#)). The AU also sought to influence the normative and institutional structures of multilateral organizations by fostering shared African positions ([Abrahamsen et al. 2023](#)). Despite its internal dissonance, the AU succeeded in putting forward a position on United Nations Security Council reform around the Ezulwini Consensus ([Ayodele 2023](#)). The consensus reflects long-standing critiques of the democratic deficit of the United Nations system and its colonial origins, established at a time when most African states were not independent ([Abrahamsen et al. 2023](#), [Ayodele 2023](#)).

Hence, even at the apex of African engagement with the LIO, the dominant view across the continent remained that this is a deeply hierarchical order. It is therefore not at all surprising that current challenges to the LIO—from within and outside—resonate strongly in Africa. The portrayal of world politics as increasingly multipolar, coupled with calls for corresponding reforms of multilateral institutions, finds particular resonance on the continent. South Africa, for instance, framed its engagement with BRICS as an early iteration of that vision and, along with

other states in the region, has continued to push for a more balanced international order ([Alexandroff 2015](#), [Murithi 2023](#)). Academically, this has manifested in a growing call for the building of alternative frameworks that can best capture the regions' positions and agency in world politics ([Abrahamsen 2017](#), [Tieku 2022](#), [Isike & Iroulo, 2023](#), [Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023](#)).

### **SOUTH ASIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC**

While South Asia shares with Latin America and Africa a tradition of anticolonial skepticism toward the contemporary international order, which was especially pronounced during the years of the Non-Aligned Movement ([Prashad 2007](#), [Mišković et al. 2014](#)), in recent decades, it has departed more markedly from that tradition. More recent scholarship from South Asia on international order has a more pronounced foreign policy bent as a result.

Since 2006, there has been a push under the banner of a free and open Indo-Pacific to redefine the Indo-Pacific as an alternative regional order that spans from India to Japan and everything in between, including the ASEAN region discussed in the second section, as well as Australia, New Zealand, and even beyond (to the other side of the Pacific, e.g., Chile). While this is a policy-driven initiative, it finds its echoes in scholarship, so this is another context besides China where we see a policy–scholarship nexus develop around questions of order. Many observe that India has turned away from anti-Western foreign policy toward many aspects of the United States–led international order, partly due to India's concerns about a rising China ([Ollapally 2018](#)). The idea is to create a United States–friendly bloc in the region to counter China, and the project has been spearheaded by Japan with the support of the United States ([Szechenyi & Hosoya 2019](#), [Koga 2020](#)). India has also signaled its deep involvement in this particular reconceptualization of regional order ([Khan & Sullivan de Estrada 2024](#)). Even if concerns about China have increased India's willingness to work with the United States' vision of order, however, most scholars note that India still cares about recognition and wants a more balanced international order ([Bajpae 2024](#)). The United States courts India as a strategic partner, and India supports Washington's [USA's AU: Washington DC](#) goals within the Indo-Pacific region while charting a course aimed to enhance its own strategic autonomy ([Mukherjee 2020](#), [Paul 2024](#)). Other countries in the region that are closer to China (e.g., Pakistan) have been more skeptical of the Indo-Pacific vision of regional order building and even the concept itself ([Ashraf 2017](#)). In fact, China eschews the term “Indo-Pacific” for its political

and strategic overtones and prefers the term “Asia Pacific.”

There have been two main contributions to conceptualizations of international order from scholars who work on South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, following directly from the policy imperatives discussed above. One is the notion of a multiplex world, as advanced by Amitav Acharya. In his vast body of scholarship, Acharya contends that the LIO is nearing the end and the West is declining (see, e.g., [Acharya 2017, 2025](#)), but this is not something to fear. The LIO will be replaced by a more culturally and politically diverse future world order. This will not be a multipolar world order as traditionally understood because it will be more regionalized both institutionally and informally, rather than centralized and universal. Acharya (along with Buzan) has also been advancing a more pluralistic vision for the discipline of IR to match the new multiplex international order he is forecasting, as well as advocating for the use of historical approaches to inspire alternative, more diverse conceptions of world order (Acharya & Buzan 2019, [Acharya & Pardesi 2025](#); see also [Phillips & Sharman 2015, Pardesi 2017](#)).

The second major contribution is associated with the concepts of “civilizationalism” and “civilizational state.” Civilizational worldviews gained salience after the end of the Cold War and especially after 9/11 ([Bettiza et al. 2023](#)), but they have particular resonance in Southeast Asia. India has a long and rich history of claiming to be a civilizational state ([Mawdsley 2023](#)), going back to Nehru and Gandhi, who had more pluralistic and cosmopolitan conceptions of what it means to be a civilization ([Srivastava 2023](#)). More recently, India’s civilizational vision has become more exclusivist and oriented toward Hindutva (Chatterjee & Das 2023, [Srivastava 2023](#)). This is in some tension with the free and open Indo-Pacific vision described above, which is supposed to be an alliance of more liberal states, but the Modi government has attempted to solve that tension by arguing that “ancient (Hindu) India was in fact the home of democracy” ([Mawdsley 2023](#), p. 428) and therefore has nothing to learn about liberalism. Instead, India is cast as vishwaguru (world teacher) ([Sullivan de Estrada 2023](#)). Interestingly, India’s claims to be a civilizational state have spread and been picked by other similarly situated countries such as Turkey ([Haug & Roychoudhury 2023](#)) and Russia (Mezhuyev 2018) with similarly expansionist aims. This civilizational state discourse, at least in its current form, implies a world order that is more akin to that imagined by the radical right in the West ([Abrahamsen et al. 2024](#)), in some sense the much darker version of Acharya’s multiplex future.

## EURASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

At the policy level, some of the greatest challenges to the LIO emanate from Eurasia and the Middle East. From the Middle East to Russia to Central Asia, very few states in this region are genuinely invested in the LIO, but they are also quite embedded in various aspects of it, from security alliances to institutional frameworks. Part of this dynamic has to do with the proximity of this region to the core of the modern international order, which creates a love-hate relationship and constant preoccupation with the West. Unlike other regions that can imagine charting an entirely different or at least more autonomous course from the West and the LIO, the main actors in this part of the world are more prone to imagining a takeover of international order. For example, both the Soviet Union and Russia at times have imagined themselves the true leader of international order. Russia and Turkey have flirted with full inclusion in the West and the core of the LIO; the fact that such inclusion was not possible has created both resentment and opportunities to undermine certain institutions within ([Adler-Nissen & Zarakol 2021](#)). The loudest complaints about Western hypocrisy and the false promises of the LIO are found in this region as well ([Lawson & Zarakol 2023](#)). Even Islamic fundamentalist movements are in deeply entrenched relational dynamics with the West. Iran was one of the closest allies of the United States before it became one of its chief enemies.

Perhaps this is why we do not find many alternative visions of international order in this region (as opposed to alternative visions of who should dominate), especially if we leave aside the radical visions of nonstate jihadist entities such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State ([Devji 2017](#)). There are volumes of scholarship about how Russia aims to undermine, if not destroy, the LIO, but whatever Russia's visions for disruption are ([Kurowska & Reshetnikov 2021](#)), in terms of a world order vision, it does not amount to much more than a return to twentieth-century bipolarity or nineteenth-century multipolarity. Other major states in the region such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia do not seem particularly interested in upending the current international order beyond pushing for more balance, as we have seen in other regions covered in previous sections.

As alluded to above, civilizational discourse has made quite a headway in this region ([Dudlák 2025](#)), and critiques about the hierarchical nature of the LIO also resonate strongly. However, these critiques of the West are borrowed and then put to use in service of similarly expansionist and hierarchical projects ([Morozov 2015](#), Çapan & Zarakol 2017).**\*\*\*AU: This reference is not in the Lit. Cited. Please add there or remove from here.\*\*\*** Russia's push for

a Eurasian order is not particularly different from its imperial projects in the past and is very much about status seeking vis-à-vis the West ([Flockhart & Korosteleva 2022](#), Sharafutdinova 2023, [Reshetnikov 2024](#), Laruelle [2025](#)). As in East and South Asia, we also find a turn to history to support such civilizational discourses, especially with Turkey and its Ottoman past. Although a lot of such historiography is problematic, as in the Chinese case ([Cinar 2018](#), [Bargu 2021](#)), there is also some promise here for the future: The history of Eurasia is fertile ground for alternative conceptions of sovereignty and world order ([Balci 2021](#), [Zarakol 2022](#)).

## CONCLUSION

Debates around international order outside of the West reveal a recurring engagement with the hierarchical and Western-centric nature of twentieth-century international order. This is true across diverse intellectual traditions, time periods, and geographical regions. Notably, scholars in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia have long critiqued the LIO's Eurocentric foundations and ties to colonialism, well before these ideas made their way into mainstream conversations in IR. Such grievances notwithstanding, it is also a shared trait across regions (perhaps apart from China) that scholars took a more positive attitude toward engagement of the LIO during its unipolar peak in the 1990s. We could speculate that this trend reflected the booming numbers of regional scholars receiving their PhD training in the United States and the Global North in this period and, consequently, their increased engagement with IR's mainstream. As cracks in the LIO's hegemony became apparent, these intellectuals gradually shifted their discussions toward multipolarity, while sometimes calling for a reform of the existing order.

The literature under review highlights not only a growing intellectual skepticism of the current order but also a grappling with the sense that this order is getting reconfigured right before our very eyes. Many of the works surveyed point to a twin dynamic at play for this assessment. First are the increasing internal contradictions in the (former) pillars of the liberal order. Second, there are formidable challenges to this order in the shape of China and Russia as they seek to shake the dominance of the West (in different ways).

Our survey has shown that significant differences remain in how different regions conceptualize their positionality in past, current, and future world orders and their alignment therein. In many ways, this represents a reckoning. Some regional debates on world order contrast Western dominance with indigenous or historical civilizational traditions. These

discussions either seek foundations for change or advocate for pluralism, as seen in the multiplexity debate. Others examine internal Western hierarchies to shift their own countries' relative positions or claim ownership of the existing order. Across all surveyed works, radical alternatives are rare; most propose reforms for greater pluralism within the existing LIO (or a future version of it) rather than its complete overhaul, although there are differences in which aspects the various regions are most dissatisfied with. While some essentialist and civilizational views hint at alternative ordering(s), their practical application remains unclear, and genuinely radical visions, such as indigenous cosmologies of Latin America or Australia, are themselves distant from sites of power.

However, we find that these diverse responses encompass three broad sets of critiques of the LIO's current crisis. First, some visions present a mostly positional critique, where the solution to its crises lies in its takeover by new (and supposedly better) non-Western power centers. Here, critiques of the liberal character of the LIO stem less from ideology than from its close association with Western powers. These views see the LIO as a game between great powers and a tussle for the leadership role. These arguments are especially found in the scholarship on and from Eurasia and the Middle East, although they have their adherents in Asia as well.

A second response disputes ownership of the order and calls for institutionally addressing the historical inequalities upon which it was built in a broader push for greater inclusion and pluralism, although often still operating within the same modern liberal institutional framework. These visions tend to accept the universalist foundations of the LIO but challenge the contradictions of its current implementation. We find these arguments especially in Latin America and the parts of Eurasia and Asia more closely integrated with the LIO.

Finally, a third set of visions critiques the LIO through cultural difference by highlighting how past and present non-Western practices, understandings, or values diverge from those dominant in the Western-led order. Arguments of this sort have been made in all of the surveyed regions but are most clearly articulated in the Chinese tradition on the one hand and in the indigenous cosmologies of the Global South (as expressed, for instance, in Latin America and Africa) on the other.

In other words, these positional, institutional, and cultural critiques cut across regions, but they also cluster geographically. Latin America, South Asia, and Africa have long sought to contest the LIO institutionally through multilateral engagement and reform, while responses in

Eurasia tend to take a more positional form. In East Asia, critiques based on cultural differences and on positional perspectives are both prevalent, sometimes overlapping. Cultural critiques are also found across multiple regions, often through more radical calls for multiplexity or even pluriversality. In this sense, non-Western visions of international order are less clear-cut alternative projects than varied attempts to make sense of the place of the LIO and its apparent decline beyond the West. Nevertheless, these reflections on the LIO and its transformation jointly highlight the diverse regional responses that will shape the future of international order.

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